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THE MAD ENGLISHMAN

BY NORMAN DOUGLAS

I HAVE been learning about the Ass Wouralia; likewise about the Rumpless Fowl and its absurd objection to laying fertile eggs; about the Vulture's Nose and Apple Trees and Cannibalism and Dry Rot; about Tight Shoes, Tight Stays, and Tight Cravats. In other words, I have been reading Waterton's Essays—magnificent stuff! Or rather, re-reading them. For a close inspection of the dusty volumes has revealed an inscription to the effect that they were purchased by myself in the summer of 1882; and the pages, furthermore, are enriched—encrusted, one might say—with holograph annotations of that year, setting forth very candidly my opinions of the author and his work. It has given me mixed feelings to peruse this running commentary, testifying, as it does, to a dreadfully deficient sense of humanity, to ardent love of natural history coupled with a certain elvish facetiousness which may well have passed, in those unregenerate days, for humor. How—how odd they are—these glimpses into one's own vanished self!

Of course we all know Waterton's *Wanderings*—that astounding book wherein, by the help of copious tags from Horace and Cervantes, the courteous reader is beguiled from his comfortable fireside into the wilds of Guiana, there to undergo nerve-shattering encounters with Labarri snakes and other improbable monsters, to devour dimpled monkey-babies and ride on crocodiles. Let me at once say that I firmly believe this cayman business. If David Livingstone or the anonymous author of the Book of Job told me they had performed such a feat, I should acquiesce—out of sheer politeness. In Waterton's case I acquiesce from conviction. Nobody, you will say, has ever ridden on a cayman. Exactly! Nobody but Waterton would ever have dreamt of doing any of the things that he did. Nobody, for ex-

ample, would dream of riding on a crocodile. That settles it. Waterton rode on a crocodile.

One would think that a naturalist penetrates into these tropical jungles in order to study their wonderful life or to collect birds and insects. But such is not his style: not a bit of it. He goes there to find the wourali poison, being convinced—for some cryptic reasons which I despair of elucidating—that it might prove a cure for hydrophobia. And why should a non-professional trouble his head about the treatment of hydrophobia? Ah, that is Waterton's secret and his charm! Why, indeed—why any of the funny things he did?

It is a pity that we possess no photographs of this prince of eccentrics. He objected to being taken in any position save from the rear—a rather inadequate method of portraiture; the bust of him, fashioned in old age, strikes me as chill and unsympathetic, but the frontispiece to the third volume of the *Essays* may give some idea of his whimsical and kindly nature. Not that he could not fight. He fought his zoological contemporaries and enjoyed many a lusty bout with Audubon and “Master Swainson” and Macgillivray; he fought the Treasury, he fought his neighbors. He fought, above all things, that Protestantism which had despoiled his grandfathers of their worldly goods in the days of “Saint Harry the Eighth, our Royal Goat.” While praying for unbelievers—

“I pray for those who now have got
A creed infected with the rot,
And wickedly have set at naught
That which our ancestors had taught. . . .

“Again, for those I often pray,
Who tread in Luther's crooked way;
Or Calvin trust, or seek salvation
In Mrs. Southcote's proclamation”—

he invented, simultaneously, a truly Watertonian device for giving vent to his bellicose feelings by projecting all Lutheran misdeeds, past, present, and to come, into the *corpus vile* of an insignificant quadruped—to wit, “Hanoverian” rat. This miserable rodent, because it was presumably introduced by “Dutch William,” became for him the embodiment of non-Catholic propensities and was persecuted with the ardor of a Torquemada.

For the rest, he was a man of peace; an autochthonous gentleman of the North country—the finest flower of generations of crusted fox-hunting Tories. A man of merits, too; a pioneer of taxidermy, and an indefatigable observer in the field. But, chiefest of all, a perambulating repository of fads and perversities.

Those Essays of his—a kind of intellectual back-water—seem to have been written on another planet. And yet, somehow or other, they are intensely human; so unsystematic—so very, very English in their glorious irrelevancies. He ambles through a hundred pages of a “History of the Monkey Family”—stranger history was never written; discourses amiably of this and that; argues whether monkeys throw missiles or not; relates his friendship with a caged lady-chimpanzee and how, on departing, he implanted a soft kiss on her maidenly cheek; and concludes with the startling proposition that monkeys are arboreal animals. He can be as pompously platitudinous as you like—

“Inhabitants of Scarbro’!—I love to pass my leisure hours amongst you. May you ever smile and ever prosper. But, observe! although old Ocean rolls his favors on you, your Mother Earth has not been quite so bountiful: for you cannot boast a river. . . .

“Who can look without rapture on the beautiful proportions of the horse? His mane hanging down a well-formed neck, seems a counter-balance to his long flowing tail as he moves along; and we are all of us aware of what amazing advantage this last-mentioned appendage is to this noble beast, when a host of flies are ready to devour him. . . .

But though all these Essays are saturated with the author’s idiosyncrasies, the most poignant revelation of his incongruous nature is that autobiography which runs alongside. There is a smack of the Grand Tours lingering in this record of a leisurely progress through the regions of continental Europe; a smack, too, of a decidedly queer outlook upon things in general:

“At Rimini, now celebrated for its miraculous picture of the Blessed Virgin, we could see the larger and smaller species of bats, on wing, as the night set in. Here again, large turkeys and common fowls were most numerous. . . . Fleas were vigorously skipping about, but we neither saw nor felt a bug.”

One can imagine the impression created by such a man at a civilized foreign town like Aachen. He never drank wine or beer; he never slept in a bed; he never wore a hat or

boots; he spoke and dressed oddly; he got up every morning at three thirty and spent his time dissecting crayfish or anything else that came handy. What must the hotel servants and visitors have thought of him? I know perfectly well what they thought. *Der verrückte Engländer!* He is, he must be, the prototype of that "mad Englishman" whose tradition still survives here and there.

Only think what he did in Rome. To begin with, the road happening to be in bad repair, he arrived at the Eternal City with his feet in such a condition that he was laid up for two months on a sofa (he was always doing foolish things with his bare feet, and always suffering for it). Hardly is he well again than he climbs up the angel that surmounts the castle of Sant' Angelo and takes up his stand, on one foot, on its head—a position that would have made any self-respecting chamois seasick. All Rome rings with the exploit: even the Pope becomes interested in the mad son of Albion. Now Waterton, a devout Catholic, would dearly have liked an audience of His Holiness and the thing might have been managed if—if the Squire could have been induced to don some English (Protestant) uniform for the occasion. But no: the Hanoverian rat!

To console himself, he watches the pig-killing operations at the slaughter-house, compiles a careful catalogue of the birds that are exposed for sale in the market, haggles with small boys about rock-thrushes' eggs, and spends fabulous sums in the purchase of sham masterpieces of art. At last all is ready for departure: eighty birds have been preserved, as well as a porcupine, a badger, some shell-fish, and a dozen land tortoises.

He departs; but not alone. With him go, in a roomy cage, a dozen living owls. And thereby hangs a tale. For these owls, squeezed through the Genoa custom-house by hook or by crook, suffer a serious mishap on reaching Aachen. The fact is, their plumage had become soiled from the long journey, even as Waterton himself was somewhat inconvenienced by its effects. Warm water is plainly desirable, and it stands to reason that what is good for the Squire is also good for the owls. Waterton orders a hot bath for himself, and another one for the owls. They get it. "Five of them," he records, "died of cold the same night."

I would give my ears to see the procession winding up the drive of Walton Hall after one of these continental raids

and pilgrimages. Even on ordinary occasions the domain must have been a sight for the gods. For if the Squire as a human being was full of irresponsible fancies, here the whole region oozed eccentricity. Freaks stared you in the face. The park contained an agglomeration of weird contrivances for catching this and killing that; the mansion, beginning at the very door-knocker, was a nightmare of monstrosities and playfully-ghoulish surprises. Your head swam; you were bewildered, dazed by freaks.

And the arch-freak was the owner himself.

On his fourth trip to South America (1824) he traversed a portion of the United States—drawn thither, largely, by the descriptions he had read in Wilson's *Ornithology*. He was hugely pleased with the "gentle and civil people," and more particularly by the ladies, to whose attractions he reverts again and again. "Nothing can surpass the appearance of the American ladies, when they take their morning walk, from twelve to three, in Broadway. The stranger will at once see that they have rejected the extravagant superfluities which appear in the London and Parisian fashions"—here follows a characteristic disquisition on women's hats—"They seem to have an abhorrence (and a very just one) of wearing caps. . . . How would Canova's Venus look in a mob cap?" He talks of the "immense number of highly polished females who go in the stages to visit the different places of amusement," adding that "words can hardly do justice to their unaffected ease and elegance."

At New York, "all charges included, you do not pay more than two dollars a day. Little enough, when you consider the capital accommodations and the abundance of food." Buffalo, too, possesses a "fine and commodious inn." Here, in stepping out of the stage-coach, the Squire had the misfortune to sprain his foot, an accident which he recorded, in one of those polite verse-effusions to which he was subject, in some lines beginning—

"He sprained his foot and hurt his toe,
On the rough road near Buffalo.
It quite distresses him to stagger a-
Long the sharp rocks of famed Niagara. . . ."

Now, to spray an inflamed joint with cold water is plainly the correct treatment. But everything in America being on

a grand scale, the traveler's ideas become enlarged as he journeys through the country, and he soon discovers that the watering-can or village pump, which might have ministered to an injured limb in England, is hopelessly out of place; bigger forces must be requisitioned; nothing, in fact, will serve the occasion save to hobble painfully down and suspend the swollen ankle under the cataract of Niagara. This is Waterton all over. After that, he goes to Canada, and "in all the way from Buffalo to Quebec, I only met with one bug; and I cannot even swear that it belonged to the United States." It was a half-grown, ill-conditioned beast, and instead of being treated after the manner of its kind, it was "quietly chucked among some baggage that was close by, and recommended to get ashore by the first opportunity." Who but Waterton would have recorded such an incident? While thinking himself a perfectly natural person, he was temperamentally incapable of behaving like anybody else.

Gilbert White, no doubt, was his intellectual ancestor. But White had an industry and full-blooded zeal which the other lacked; he was discriminating, purposeful, constructive; altogether, a luminous creature and of relatively modern texture. Waterton is more readable than naturalists like Jesse on account of his all-pervading personal note; but taken all round, he remains chiefly conspicuous for his negative qualities, for his splendid limitations. He had no spacious view of life—no view at all, save through a certain narrow telescope that restricted the field of vision, intensifying one tract at the expense of another. What the world presented to his eyes was an assemblage of disconnected facts which it was his business not to explain but to record. Tobacco-smoking is a beastly habit; to wear an amulet against sudden death is an excellent idea; man does not kill his fellows, because there is a law written in his heart forbidding him to do so—and the wigeon eats grass. Such is "Dame Nature's" command. She knows what is good for everything and everybody; and if she sometimes makes a mistake or exceeds her mandate—why, there is always God overhead, to put things to rights again.

So he lived, this mellow country gentleman; at once a warning and an exemplar, like the rest of us. He had a bird-like habit of pecking at all sorts of mental pabulum, and

allowing it to pass out of his system half-digested. His worldly experiences never resolved themselves into a truthful whole, for Stonyhurst, if it fortified his moral sense, had warped and atrophied his mind, rendering him permanently unsynthetic—fragmentary in every point save one: in his crankiness. In that he was superb. If a man took thought for a lifetime, he could never figure forth a more harmonious and lovable freak. As grotesque as that old fowl of Mauritius, he is nowadays, alas, almost as rare. For phoenixes are all very well, but we do need an occasional dodo, to diversify the landscape.

Darwin may quote from the original and accurate observations of the Yorkshire squire, but what does Waterton care for the portentous movement of his later life—what does he know of any of those landmarks like Homer or Dante or Goethe? He had been fed on orthodox pap, on Virgil, Dryden, and other safe writers; and it is a suggestive commentary on our social state that this mighty personage, the twenty-seventh Lord of Walton, should be disqualified by his creed from attaining that elementary knowledge which was at the disposal of the poorest peasant boy on his estate. To chronicle the matrimonial irregularities of the barnacle gander; to feed your unsuspecting visitors on a dish of carrion crows and chuckle inwardly at their mistaking them for pigeons; to jump at the age of seventy-nine over a formidable wire fence—these were his aims and diversions.

It was one of his jocular habits to give names to the more prominent animals and trees in his park. Among the birds there was a malformed wild duck, deprived of the web between its toes, which Waterton had received as a gift “in an ecstasy of delight”—seeing that everything in the nature of a “sport” struck a chord of elective affinity and warmed the cockles of his heart. This bird was forthwith christened “Doctor Hobson.”

Its human original, a genial and loyal physician of Leeds, was himself something of an ornithologist who became acquainted with Waterton during the latter part of his life, and took charge of his health—as best he could. In after years he wrote an account of the “Home, Habits, and Handicraft” of his friend which is truly refreshing—a kind of spiritual shower-bath—in these strenuous days of sex-problems. Doctor Hobson venerated the Squire and all his

little failings; he assimilated his curiously tangled and wayward style of writing; he has entered into the very bones of his hero. And not all of us, be it noted, are heroes to our medical advisers. This biography is a fine monument of friendship; even as the friendship itself says much for the characters of both of them, since Waterton's peculiarities might well have repelled other men of science. I suspect that the unswerving uprightness of the Squire won the doctor's affection; that little incident at Leeds, too, when Waterton with incredible nerve and steadiness of hand removed twenty-eight rattlesnakes from one box into another, may well have impressed a medicine-man, conscious of the ever-present risk of death.

Be that as it may, the Squire has found a Boswell after his own heart; the enthusiastic reporter of all his anfractuosities, of all his gentlemanly pranks and absurdities. The Table of Contents alone of this remarkable book is a joy forever. It contains items like this: *An Ox-Eye Titmouse builds her Nest in the Trunk of a Tree prepared for Owls; but declines occupying it in future years because a Squirrel had used it.* Or this: *Discriminating Courage of the Squire with an Ourang-Outang from Borneo, in the Zoological Gardens;* followed by: *The Ape Searching the Squire's head reminds him of a Cambridge anecdote.* Or take these stimulating entries: *An Allusion to a stench from a dead herring near the Grotto, induces the Squire to relate an incident regarding dead letters. . . . Mr. Waterton faces a snow-storm without his Hat, and throws his Slippers over his head when approaching his 80th year. . . . Mr. Waterton distressed because his Bahia toad was called an "Ugly Brute!"*

The volume is full of stupendous things of this kind; it reproduces also some of the Squire's letters which illustrate the child-like structure of his mind:

"I don't care who holds the helm of our crazy vessel, so long as "Mummary John" does not get hold of it. You did not arrive according to promise. We hope to be more fortunate on Palm Sunday after you have requested your spiritual adviser to keep a blessed palm for you, when he delivers the sprigs to the assembled multitude from his Altar. Stop, I ought to say table. Many thanks for your communication. I hope that you will pursue the investigation. It is somewhat singular that I have never yet found the large bone in the wings of water-fowl full of marrow. . . ."

There is another entry to this effect: *The Squire remon-*

strated with by the Author against too frequently "tapping the Claret." This excessive "tapping the Claret" bleeding himself—was one of the few traits of which the physician-biographer disapproved. Whatever happened to Waterton—whether he ate too much, or tumbled off a mule, or had an accident with his gun, or caught a chill: out with the lancet! Even in his eightieth year he did not hesitate to bleed himself to the tune of twenty to twenty-four ounces at a time; he must have lost a barrellful of the precious liquid in the course of his long life. In the jungle he tried to induce the vampire-bat to bleed him; many a night, he says, "have I slept with my foot out of the hammock to tempt this winged surgeon"—in vain! He was dry as a stick, and the sagacious vespertilian sought its dinner elsewhere.

And of course his ultra-Catholic tendencies were not quite to the taste of Hobson, who, however, deals gently with such infirmities, merely suggesting that he "had an inordinate amount of credulity in his composition." Indeed he had. He was no modernist or reconciler of the impossible, but a Catholic *comme il faut*. Reared in the unrelenting machinery of Stonyhurst, he was cut into its cleanest pattern, and preserved throughout life its edges intact, its surface untarnished.

He traveled expressly to the Tyrol to see an ecstatic female in a convent, and convinced himself of her divine state by feeling the stigma on one of her hands. Nothing in his whole life, he says, struck him so forcibly as the liquefaction, at Naples, of the mixture which he devoutly held to be the blood of Saint Januarius. He speaks with reverent awe of Benedict Labre—that half-witted vagabond, who never washed or took off his clothes, and was covered from head to foot with vermin which he refused to exterminate. And although a belief in the miraculous transportation of the House of the Blessed Virgin is optional to his co-religionists, yet he writes that there are authentic proofs of the aerial voyage of this mansion, and that, for his part, he believes in the miracle.

Doctor Hobson's chief concern was to mitigate the severity of those periodical abstinences from food which the Squire's stern Catholicism imposed upon him. As for the House of Loreto and the like—he had too much tolerance to disquiet himself about such discrepancies. After all, birds are birds and men are men; all of them liable to variations, and

all these variations ordained for dark providential reasons. A sparrow hops and a wagtail runs: shall all human beings think and behave alike? And if inclined, at times, to regret his friend's "ardent attachment to the priests," he amply compensated himself by praising his sincere love of nature, his rectitude and guileless purity of heart and—last but not least—those flexible lower extremities which enabled him, as a heavy patriarch, to scratch the back part of his head with the big toe of his right foot or to clamber aloft, with the agility of an adolescent gorilla, into the breezy summit of an oak.

And here we leave this *par nobile fratrum*: Æsculapius on earth, fondly admiring but prudent; his ever-youthful octogenarian comrade in the verdurous foliage overhead, reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and glancing occasionally through a spy-glass to see if perchance the Rumpless Fowl, that preposterous and unmatronly bird, has at last thought fit to hatch her own offspring in accordance with Dame Nature's self-evident decree.

NORMAN DOUGLAS.